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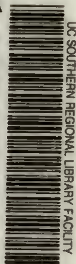

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Style in Musical Art

An Inaugural Lecture

Delivered at Oxford on March 7, 1900

By

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STYLE IN MUSICAL ART

I FEEL sure that it is justifiable for me to begin for once with a digression. For, though it is generally desirable to come to close quarters with one's subject as soon as possible, there may be a natural cause of distraction which it is better to pay tribute to than to ignore. However much I might wish to draw your attention to the matter of style, I could neither wish nor think it likely that any other subject should be so importunate at the moment as the absence of Sir John Stainer. The strangeness of the feeling that the wonted has given place to the unwonted may be mitigated to a certain extent by the absence of the familiar Sheldonian landmarks, but the fact remains that an ideal Professor and a most lovable man has relinquished the burdens and responsibilities of office, and that Oxford is deprived thereby of the privilege and delight of listening to his lucid and genial exposition of rich stores of long accumulated learning. It appears to me that his ten years' tenure of the Professorship has been of greater advantage to the University than any like period in her musical history. The Professorship seems always liable to be bestowed

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upon men who have borne the burden and heat of the day, and who are likely to have settled down into convictions and habits which make it difficult to move with the times. But the Professor who, to our great loss, is not addressing you to-day, was of so liberal a nature, and so free from anything resembling ossification, that if he had held the Professorship for a hundred years instead of ten, I believe he would be still widening and expanding his horizon, and constantly on the look-out to keep the examinations level with the inevitable progress of art, and to encourage with his sympathy, and with energetic practical furtherance, any movement or project which had for its object the increase of opportunities to hear and appreciate the best and richest examples of our art, and to help people to come into touch with what is noble and pure and inspiring. I should gladly run on for my allotted hour in singing his praises, and the praises of those who devotedly furthered his objects and helped in his work; but perhaps in Oxford it would be superfluous. None but those whose inner vision is constitutionally oblique could fail to appreciate the large-hearted generosity, the frank sincerity, the open-mindedness, the wide range of interests, the shrewdness in judgement, the vivacity of mind and intelligence, the lovable human qualities, the wide range of knowledge, the steadfastness and constancy in labouring to accomplish perfectly whatever came to him to do, the ardour to enliven as well as to enlighten, the loyalty to friends as well as to ideals, which combined to make a unique Professor; whose tenure of the Professorship raised the standard of

respect in which musicians may well desire to be held, and the standard of their own sense of responsibility as followers of an honourable art. But though there must be regret in the hearts of all right-minded people that Sir John is not addressing you to-day, it is only in the official capacity that Oxford loses him. His influence will surely be as great as ever, and possibly the relaxation of the strain of responsibility will make it more prolonged. Maybe the opportunities to hear his admirable discourses will be difficult to obtain, but there is every reason to hope that Oxford will enjoy his light-diffusing presence for many years; and that those who have the anxious task of following him will not only have the admirable guidance of his example, but the actual tangible help of his healthy common sense and sympathetic encouragement.

Turning now to the subject which is proposed for our consideration to-day, it must be confessed that one can hardly think of style in man or nature or art without being importunately haunted by a familiar French proposition, which conveys to the superficial mind the view that manner counts for more than man. No doubt the familiar '*Le style c'est l'homme*' compares unfavourably with the more ancient saying 'By their fruits ye shall know them,' but it is probable that it was not intended to attribute so much importance to externals as the aptitude of men for misunderstanding things which are too tersely stated leads them to infer. There are thousands of things by which a man's nature may be gauged besides style. Everything that is part of him may in some

sense be a gauge of him. Just as a great naturalist has been said to be able to reconstruct some unknown animal from a single bone, men say you can tell a man's nature by the shape of his nose or his hand, or the expression of his mouth, by his walk, by the tone of his voice. Everything may serve the quick-witted as a basis of inference, though all may not be equally trustworthy. Style is mainly an external attribute—a means to an end, and in no wise comparable to actual qualities of character or action in man, or the thought embodied in what is said in poetry, or the idea embodied in art. But it is an essential. It is present in everything which has real vitality, and in every moment of art's existence. And as it is infinitely variable in relation to the conditions in which artistic work is presented, it serves as a very comprehensive means of inferring the genuineness either of man or of artistic work.

Differences of style are the outcome of the instinct for adaptation. In art the most perfect style is that which is most perfectly adapted to the conditions of presentment. Many different factors minister to its development. For instance, material counts for a great deal. If a work has to be executed in stone the particular qualities of the material necessitate a style of art different from that of works executed in iron. The effects which can aptly be produced in one material are quite different from those which can be produced in another. The result of trying to imitate effects which can be produced in one kind of material in another which has quite different properties is either stupid or vulgar in proportion to the dexterity of the worker; and

style is either gratifying or repulsive in proportion to its just relation to its conditions. It is the same in life as in art. To take an extreme case: the style of an untutored savage in a very hot climate might be quite picturesque and appropriate in his own country, but if any ill-regulated being were to adopt it in the streets of a cool and civilized city he would probably have to be suppressed. There is a technique of life as well as of art, and the style of every section of society varies in accordance with its conditions; and the outcome of attempts to adopt a style belonging to one branch of society in a branch of society whose conditions of life are altogether different is vulgarity. When we come to apply these considerations to music we find circumstances of the same nature. In music the simplest parallel to the differences of material in plastic arts lies in the varieties of means by which music is to be performed and made appreciable to sense. All music which is worthy of the name must in the nature of things be written to be performed by instruments or voices. And they all have their particular idiosyncrasies. Organs have their special aptitudes and their special inaptitudes; and the music which is written for them, if it is to attain to any degree of artistic perfection, must be based upon the recognition of them. Violins have their special powers of expression and effect, and their limitations; horns have theirs, and trombones theirs. Voices can do certain things that instruments cannot do, and all instruments can do things which voices cannot do. There is, as it were, a dialect appropriate to each instrument and each class of voice; and there are even ideas which can

be better expressed in one dialect than another; and the employment of any particular means of utterance, whether violins, pianofortes, organs, hautboys, bassoons, voices, harps or trumpets is only justified when they are used for passages which can exactly be given with fullest effect by them.

If there is a style for each individual member of the orchestra, even more essentially is there a style for the orchestra as a whole. It is capable of almost unlimited complexities of rhythm and figure, of varieties of colour which are countless. In power of tone it is tremendous, in depth of expression infinite. To venture to put such an engine of power into motion at all seems to be courting responsibility. And to put it into motion to utter things which would be quite adequately expressed by a pianoforte or a set of voices is like calling the House of Lords together to cook a homely omelet. People do not hear orchestral music often enough to realize what the highest instrumental style is. But any one who has a sense of the adequate adaptation of technique to material or means of performance revolts at choral music written in the style of a brass band, organ music which is mere pianoforte music, or orchestral music in disguise. But the hurry and lack of concentration of modern life, and the habit of producing for a public which has neither discrimination nor education, and the habit of playing such a vast amount of arrangements all tend to dull people's sense of the essential meaning of style, and to make composers miss the higher artistic opportunities in the urgent desire to gratify ephemeral whims.

But style is far from being regulated only by the essential peculiarities of the instruments by which the music is to be performed. Every detail in the situation for which the music is intended, the attitude of mind to which it is to appeal, and the circumstances under which it is to be performed have bearing upon the methods suitable to be employed, and therefore upon the style. When music is intended for domestic consumption it entails a totally different style from that which would be suited to some great public function. It entails its being pure enough to live with, and rich enough to sustain constant interest, and a level of thought more near to the contemplative than the active. While the music of the public function must be stirring and brilliant, direct and forcible, and it attains its highest standard when it is elevating and noble in diction. Even in characteristic deteriorations the difference of style peeps out. The risks of the domestic style are sentimentality and languorous and unhealthy sensuosity, and the risk of the public-rejoicing style is blatant vulgarity. Of style in relation to attitude of mind and mood that of the old Church music is probably most characteristic. Its contemplative and devotional character, its quietude and inwardness, were partly owing to the limited development of artistic technique before the latter part of the sixteenth century, and to the fact that no other style was sufficiently developed to distract the minds of composers. The effect of the circumstances and the attitude of submission to the authority of the Church was to produce a style so subtly consistent and so perfectly regulated that hardly anything in the range

of modern art can compare with it. The instant true secular music came into being it was doomed. The secular phraseology could not be kept out of it, and in no great space of time submerged the devotional element, and the hybrid which resulted was of the most mixed quality. Sometimes even divinely beautiful, and at others grossly repulsive. Sometimes vibrating with human love and tenderness, and sometimes redolent of the most nauseous vulgarities of the opera. But in either case the style was mainly governed by the attitude of mind to which the composers intended to appeal.

Conspicuous difference of style is induced by different conditions of presentment. This is obviously the case in respect of music which is associated with words, and music intended to be performed without them. In music associated with words it is absolutely inevitable that the mood and expression of phrase and figure and melody and harmony, and even of form, must be in close and intimate relation with the words. The more perfect the instinct of the composer for the musical equivalents of the sentiments expressed by the words, the more perfect will be the style; and the more perfect the invention which can dispose of the ingredients in an effective and original manner, the more complete the work of art. The composer has the moods and details of expression supplied him, and the hearers understand the music through its relation to the words. But in music that is intended to be performed without words the composer is himself answerable for the moods he presents, and he has to find inherent justification for every bar he writes in some artistic, intellectual, emotional, or

aesthetic principle. To write music for instruments in the style of vocal music is doubly fatuous, for it is not only inadequate on the grounds that instruments can do so much more than voices, but that the absence of words leaves it entirely without ostensible reason for existence, when there is little or no intrinsic interest in the workmanship.

Even in the various departments of word-wed and wordless music there are infinite shades of variety of style. The music of the theatre absolutely demands a method and style different from that appropriate to vocal music of the concert room, and from the style of the domestic art song. The dramatic music of the theatre gains both advantages and disadvantages from its associations with scenery and action. For, while the mind is distracted in one respect, and pays no attention to artistic qualities which would be prominent in a quartet or a symphony, it is helped in others which would be out of place in instrumental music. The listener would probably miss the development of figures and the subtleties of abstract design if he attended to the drama, but would be quick to feel the intention and purpose of progressions, harmonies, resolutions, and successions of keys which would be unintelligible without the words, but become vividly effective from the situations with which they are associated and the development of passion which they portray. In songs which are not intended for the theatre, the qualities and methods used in quartets and sonatas are much more appropriate, because the mind is less distracted from the music itself, and has more

attention to spare for interesting constructive features and subtleties of detail. In the just apportionment of style for emotional and dramatic effects in theatrical music and domestic music the resources are so different that they can hardly be judged on the same footing. People who judge of what is dramatic in the light of what is histrionic would hesitate to call anything dramatic which was in the true style of a solo song. But indeed there is a just way of expressing tragedy, pathos, despair in the style suited to solo song, and a different way of expressing it for the stage. The opportunities of the one are more analytical and subtle, and of the other more direct and sensational. It is by no means essential that a thing shall be in histrionic style in order to justify a claim to being dramatic. The histrionic style is a speciality which I hope to consider more in detail another time. But so is the song style—and both are limited by the more delicate instinct of highly organized artistic beings in such a way that much which would be admirable in one style is positively vulgar in the other.

But if the provinces of two different kinds of vocal music are so strongly distinct, the differences between the style and even the material of operatic music and pure instrumental music are more striking still. The differences of method are so pronounced that the histrionic and the absolute seem to represent distinct territories in the musical art; and most people who call themselves musical live almost entirely in one of them, and make little effort to appreciate the good features of the other. It cannot be said that either party has

all the right on their side. It is quite true that people who are very fond of the opera are most frequently not musical at all in any sense. But there are a good many who really take it from the artistic point of view and understand it, and are perfectly justified in objecting to operas written in the style and with the methods belonging to instrumental music.

On the other hand, it may fairly be said that men of high artistic taste and perception, habituated to the purer style of absolute instrumental music, are not altogether liberal in their judgement of operatic music, and are not sufficiently ready to admit what is admirably devised for its conditions. They are apt to fall into the misconception that because certain principles of form and procedure are almost indispensable to instrumental music, any music in which they do not find them is necessarily bad. In this connexion it is impossible not to think of the violent antipathy which Wagner's style produced in men of intelligence and cultivated taste. His mature style was certainly as strongly different from that of composers of instrumental music as it is possible to conceive. It was the product of a disposition more essentially dramatic and poetically imaginative than musical. It repelled musicians who appreciated highly the time-honoured methods of art which had been consecrated by the greatest masters of instrumental music, because the composer aimed, with an instinct of genius never before shown in such a degree, at a style which was essentially adapted to the conditions of the stage; with all the distractions of the acting, the scenic

display, and the interest of the drama. It repelled, because the composer in the instinctive search after a new ideal of style disregarded all the conventions which had grown up in connexion with the only branches of art which had hitherto been really mastered. It disregarded the classical rules of resolution of discords, progressions of chords, conventions of design and clearness of tonality. Yet to the great mass of cultivated people his ideal of style proved convincing. He at all events did not make the mistake of supposing that his principles of procedure were applicable to instrumental music of any kind. That mistake was left to his imitators.

The unsuitableness of the operatic style for instrumental music is obvious to all people of taste and artistic intelligence; but in truth the employment of the style which has been developed for pure instrumental music in operas is just as futile. In both cases it is the employment of resources which have been developed for one group of conditions in conditions to which they are unsuited. And there is no reason why operatic music should not be just as well provided with beauty and interest of detail as instrumental music. Coarseness and commonness of texture are not confined to operatic music, though found there more frequently than in other branches of art. There is plenty of flabby and conventional instrumental music, which the world has gladly let drop and be forgotten. The difference of style which is entailed by the bestowal of loving care on details or indifference to them is more a question of disposition

than a necessary basis of contrast between operatic art and instrumental art. The difference is illustrated in the widest sense by the broad distinctions between the tastes of the southern and the northern races. The southern races seem to delight in what is voluptuous, and in the elements of art which appeal to sense. They set no great store on purity, and enjoy their art with indifferent promiscuity rather than with love and reverence. The northern races treat their art with more respect, and look for qualities of virginal purity upon which they can dwell with constant loving contemplation. The southerns delight in broad sweeping effects, in which details are of little consequence. The northerns, without losing anything in general imposing effect, love to make every part of their artistic work vital and interesting, so that nowhere shall commonness and the insincerity of indolence or convention be visible. The effect is shown in a very interesting phase by the story of organ music in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Italians set the ball rolling in grand style with the help of many noble composers, of whom Frescobaldi was chief. But deterioration soon set in when a facile style was adopted, in which the details were merely conventional formulas; and the southern school of organists came to worse than nothing. While the northern organists, putting their whole souls into every part of their work, rose higher and higher; and attained first to the luxury of fancy and richness of appropriate detail which is shown in the works of Buxtehude, and ultimately to the supreme ideal of the highest possibilities of art in the

organ style in the work of J. S. Bach. The work carried out with real love and devotion has a higher and more permanent interest than work done under a more vague and uncritical impulse. The difference in such respects between the southern and the northern attitude is well illustrated in the respective styles of Handel and Bach. Bach's style was evolved in the intense devotion to personal ideals. Though he studied all schools of art and absorbed from all quarters such principles as were available for his peculiar artistic disposition, he always worked with the true northern bias to present his thoughts with perfection of detail as well as of general impression; and the subordinate features of his work are therefore in the highest degree interesting and rich. While Handel, following general public taste, which was mainly Italian, aimed at greatness of general impression, at what have been described as cosmic effects, and was often voluptuous in melody and conventional in phraseology, and presents much less interest in the details. Handel holds his own by sheer weight of greatness, but the works of a great number of composers who work on the same lines and in the same style have deservedly fallen into complete oblivion.

Qualities of style are eminently illustrative of sincerity of intention. The periods in which men wrote half-heartedly, with no genuine personal intensity, prove in the end to be styleless. If the style is not distinctive, the product generally proves to be intrinsically worthless. The truly great individual masters of style are such as we know to have been passionately in earnest, and deeply

absorbed in the endeavour to attain an ideally perfect presentation of their thoughts. Beethoven and Bach, who had the most consistent degree of personal style, attained to it by infinite labour in pruning, rewriting, remodelling, and constant self-criticism. The composers who had phenomenal facility are by no means those whose style is most individual. Handel was individual in his greatness, but not in the manner of his diction. Mozart was pre-eminent in his sense of beauty, not in the originality of his manner. The most striking and persistent qualities are such as belong to the adamantine natures, not to those which are most easily malleable. The rugged manner of Carlyle cost himself and his friends untold misery; and the powerfully distinctive style of Brahms must have cost him extraordinary concentration of faculty, even if he mended and pruned less than Bach and Beethoven. It must be admitted that perfect consistency in style is not to be hoped for. Nothing is absolute in human affairs, and though the greatest men in their greatest moments employ the style which enables them to cover the most ground—in other words, such as is most perfectly adapted to the conditions of presentment—even the greatest are sometimes forced by circumstances to employ traits which are drawn from alien sources. A great deal of the music in Mozart's operas is not essentially either histrionic or operatic, but an outcome of the traditions of the conventional Italian operatic entertainment of the early part of the eighteenth century, which made scarcely any pretence of being a dramatic or a histrionic product at all. Conversely we come across passages with an operatic

flavour occasionally in Beethoven's instrumental compositions. But the greater men are less frequently betrayed into such bewilderments than those who take their responsibilities lightly. At the same time there are infinite shades of variety of style from the highest to the lowest. As there is a style for the greatest things, so there is for the least. There is a style for the music hall, which of its kind may be good and consistent, as well as for the grandest works of art. A great deal of the low and repulsive vulgarity to be met with in such quarters arises from the fact that the true ratio of style has not been found. Even popular comic operas can be admirable when the true style has been found; when they are repulsive it is mainly because the makers of them have no sense of style at all. And it would be absurd to consider the style of light art of no consequence. There must be in all men's lives infinite degrees of mood, from serious to playful. It is a very poor nature that can never be gay; but it is of great importance that the gaiety shall be of good and honest quality, and not degenerate into brutishness. And it seems to be even more important in this country than elsewhere. For almost the only English music which has been cordially welcomed by the great mass of intelligent English people throughout the world is the music of farcical topsey-turveydom. It is probably the outcome of that dislike of appearing to be pedantic and solemn, which is characteristic of certain classes, which causes them to refuse to take music anyhow but as a joke. Such taste in music is the counterpart of the habit of persiflage which has been justly attributed to

a large section of upper-class wealthy society, which does not necessarily imply an incapacity for being serious and devoted, but a dislike of showing it. It is an affectation of nonchalance which is really more dangerous in art than it is in everyday life. For the persistent habit of using an art, which is one of man's most sacred inventions, for mere trifling and fooling, is not only a degradation and an insult to the art, but is bound to produce deterioration of the standard of appreciation, and a lowering of the intention and faculty of composers. English people seem to have less quickness in perception of style than many other nations, especially in things musical. Hence the question of style in light things becomes of the more importance, since, having this predisposition for farcical and irresponsible music, lack of style will the more surely leave them wallowing in sheer unalloyed stupidity.

While insisting that style is a desirable and possible quality in every standard of art, it must be admitted that it is no positive criterion of the quality of the thoughts expressed in the style. The style can be no more than a criterion whether the thing is good of its kind or no. Yet style is so closely interwoven with every moment of art's existence that a great thought is hardly separable from the style in which it is expressed; and a great thought which comes from a full heart is almost sure to be expressed in a style which is consistently noble and dignified. Whereas a thought that a man is only trying to make appear great is often betrayed by some triviality of detail, some glaring inconsistency of phraseology which betrays the mountebank or the charlatan.

The greatest achievement in point of style is to convey the idea which belongs to the artist or the speaker in its widest significance in the exact terms—no more and no less—which will make it take the most complete hold of the human mind. The perfect style does not weary with superfluous explanations, nor leave in doubt by lack of decisiveness. It anticipates how far a suggestive word will carry the mind, and how much can be left out. It plays with associations, with relations of terms to one another, with the lilt of rhythm and the infinite variety of tone. The resources of artistic appeal to men's sensibilities and intelligence seem almost inexhaustible. But there is a very important qualification, which restricts the range of what is available, and that is consistency. All things are neither lawful nor expedient. It is the misuse of resources which is mainly responsible for vulgarity: the hodge-podge of phraseology belonging to the pulpit and the street; the jumble of symphonic style and the histrionic. Some methods of art are capable of absorbing far greater variety of traits drawn from many different quarters than others. The greater somewhat easily absorbs the less. And yet the greater easily drops and its nobility is tarnished by the deliberate utterance of a triviality. An inconsistency of style may be an accident. But if the accidents recur what seemed to be an accident becomes an essential. Many gifted composers have gone so far as to give the world a noble phrase which seems to have the qualities of fine music. But the impulse does not last. Lack of fibre, lack of the power of persistence, prevents the maintenance of the high level of thought,

and then comes the inevitable make-up—mere phrases decked in futile and superfluous ornament; tricks of art which have no real relation to the mood at first suggested. The incapacity to maintain the standard of style betrays the lack of genuineness of the momentary spasm of inspiration which seemed to promise such great things. The great minds maintain the relevancy of the mood and the style. There is no variableness nor shadow of turning in the rugged Promethean spirit of the first movement of the Ninth Symphony, no shuffling make-believe to mar the fiery concentration of the first movement of the C minor, no mundane irrelevance to weaken the triumphant sweep as of the singing of an infinite heavenly host in the *Sanctus* of the B minor Mass. The consistent elevation of the style is equal to the depth and fervour of the thought.

All things are neither lawful nor expedient in style, but those only which are perfectly consistent with the conditions, the material, and the mood which the composer expresses. There is the style which is apt for things mundane, and a style which is apt for things devotional; a style for things pathetic, a style for things gay. Trivial phraseology is out of place in times of mourning, tragic violence in times of merriment. And as the style which is inconsistent with the mood makes the product ring false, so is it with inconsistency in relation to conditions of presentment — the operatic work written in the style of absolute music, the instrumental music written in the histrionic style. There may be positive vulgarity in thought, but the greater part of vulgarity arises from misapplication

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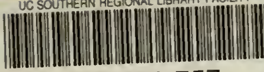
of style. While even things little and light may be made admirable by dexterous consistency of style, the greatest inspirations cannot dispense with it.

In the end style is the sum of the appearances of all the factors which make up a work of art or an entity. It is the sum of the outward manifestations of qualities. The style of an apple-tree is the sum of the appearances produced by the shape, colour, texture, and set of the foliage, the ruddy red of the fruit, and its relation to the colour and character of the foliage, and the angles of the ramifications of the branches. The style of an orange-tree is quite different. The glossy leaf, the bright yellow fruit, the scent, the method of growth of the boughs, present quite a different effect, and suggest a different climate and different conditions and surroundings. We can hardly imagine such a monstrosity in nature as a tree made up half in the style of an apple-tree and half of an orange. The absurdity of gathering grapes of thorns or figs of thistles is self-evident. Yet the law of consistency in art is just as essential and as logical as in things organic. A perfect work of art is a perfectly organized presentation of an original unity. If apples are found on one bough and figs on another, men may guess that it is a sham. The perfect adaptation to conditions entails perfect unity of style, and it may be inferred conversely that complete perfection of style is to be found in perfect and relevant consistency.



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